

"Perfin Disaster".

Roy Gault

In compiling section 'H' of the new 'Line Engraved Catalogue', the London identity for "H.G/L" (H2930.01), in use 1870-1877, seemed at odds with the '946' duplex postmarks for Middlesbrough usually found on the die. Maurice Harp answered my query with the following information from an 1877 Kelly's London Trade Directory.



Hopkins, Gilkes & Co Ltd - Manufacturers of Rails, Bars and
Angle Iron, Chairs, Pipes and all kinds of Cast Iron Work,
Locomotive & Stationery Engines, Bridge Work etc.
Works: Middlesbrough.

London office: 25 Laurence Pountney Lane, London EC.

Subsequent research has shown that the company was formed by two Middlesbrough Iron Masters.

Left: William Randolph Innes Hopkins (1827-1920).

Right: Edgar Gilkes (1821-1894).



Edgar Gilkes was born at Nailsworth (Gloucestershire) and came to Middlesbrough in 1843, having previously worked for the Stockton and Darlington Railway Company. William Hopkins (born at Wick, Scotland) came to Teesside in 1850, where, in 1853, he and a certain Mr Snowdon formed the 'Teesside Ironworks'. This later merged to become '***Hopkins, Gilkes & Co Ltd***'.

Both men became Mayor of Middlesbrough - Gilkes in 1863,
and Hopkins in 1866 and again in 1867.

Unfortunately, the company were involved in a number of mishaps. For example, a boiler at their ironworks supplying steam to drive the rolling mills exploded. Scalding steam and flying debris from the blast seriously injured 16 workers, and even hurled men into the River Tees. Sadly, many of the men died on the journey to hospital in Newcastle-on-Tyne.

Just at the time when the company was running into financial difficulties, they were fortunate to secure in July 1874 the contract for the construction of the Tay Bridge. This bridge was designed to carry the railway line linking London via Edinburgh to Dundee and the north, and crossed the Tay estuary at Wormit, Fife. At the time it was the longest bridge in the world, and opened for traffic on 31st May 1878.



Illustration from the 'Illustrated London News', 3rd January 1880.

Disaster! On the night of the 28th December 1879, a gale force wind of around 80 mph was blowing down the estuary. The central spans of the bridge collapsed and the train of five carriages fell 88 ft into the icy water below. All 75 passengers and crew were killed, although the precise number was never known. At a subsequent Court of Inquiry, the designer of the bridge, Sir Thomas Bouch, was blamed together with Hopkins, Gilkes & Company who were accused of *grave irregularities* at their Wormit foundry on the south bank of the Tay.

Naturally, such bad press ruined the company, hence the short life of the perfin. Hopkins as general manager was finished, and in 1880 he was declared bankrupt.